

The 'Macron effect' on European defence: En Marche, at last?

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The substantial victory of Emmanuel Macron and his brand-new party *En Marche!* open a window of opportunity for progress in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). However, it remains unclear whether the 'Macron effect' will act as a real game-changer in this *dossier*.

The newly elected President will need to strike a careful balance between various political forces at home. France will also continue to pursue a wide range of options regarding military engagement with partners, in Europe and beyond. Persisting 'strategic cacophony' among EU member states has greatly complicated cooperation at EU level so far. These factors suggest that continuity may prevail in Paris' approach to European defence.

At the same time, sustained leadership by France, in the context of a renewed partnership with Germany and other countries, can help narrow the gap between the level of political ambition for European defence and its many shortcomings in structures, tools and capabilities.

A (seemingly) ambitious (European) defence policy...

The defence chapter of Macron's electoral programme devotes a section to the notion of "*Europe de la défense*". It identifies UK's departure from the EU, risks of US disengagement from European security and Germany's rising (geo)political role as major shifts affecting France's strategic posture. Therefore, *En Marche!* calls for strengthening European defence cooperation by establishing a permanent EU Headquarter for the conduct of military operations and creating a "European Security Council" made up of military, diplomatic and intelligence officials. It also advocates for activating the EU Battlegroups, and creating a "European Defence Fund" to finance common armaments projects, starting with aerial unmanned vehicles/drones.

Except for the - rather ill-defined - idea of an EU Security Council, none of these proposals are new. They either link with established EU cooperation strands or reflect long-standing French positions. But Macron's vocal pro-EU stance can create a more enabling political environment for empowering CSDP, which was described in his 'Speech on Defence' on 18 March as "an unfulfilled project" to be ambitiously revived.

...marked by considerable continuity

This notwithstanding, the new "*chef des armées*" is likely to follow a rather traditional path of French defence policy, which puts the 'Macron factor' on CSDP into perspective.

Appointing the former Member of the European Parliament, Sylvie Goulard, as Defence Minister and her predecessor, Jean-Yves Le Drian, (eloquently re-labelled) as Minister for *Europe* and Foreign Affairs in the executive that will govern France until the June legislative elections, seems to confirm President's Macron's strong pro-European orientation.

However, the relative lack of experience of the *En Marche!* leadership in security affairs combined with the mixed political composition of the French government that might emerge in June is likely to translate into a rather consensual and bipartisan approach to national defence policy.

When it comes to CSDP, this has often translated in a rhetorically ambitious but essentially pragmatic approach, seeing it as a "multiplier of (French) power". This vision is shared by powerful domestic players such as the armed forces and the defence industry, and builds around a strictly inter-governmental approach to EU cooperation in this domain.

France will also continue to mobilise a large menu of multi-national cooperation formats in military matters, either for political or operational reasons. These go far beyond CSDP and include the long-standing bilateral partnership with the UK, which Macron would like to “bring to a new level” starting with strengthened technological cooperation, as well as with the US in countering terrorism both in Africa and the Middle East; mini-lateral cooperation, like the Weimar Triangle with Germany and Poland; and NATO, which Macron would like to become “less bureaucratic” while getting more active in the fight against terrorism and cyber threats.

In the end, not least due to the greater priority given to other policy goals at EU level, particularly in the fiscal and monetary domains, Macron’s defence policy and its repercussions for CSDP might not differ dramatically from what was carried out by his predecessor, François Hollande. France’s “strategic autonomy” and “global vocation” will continue to be key pillars of this posture.

The combination of the rather unprecedented commitment to European integration by the new President, reinforced by the pro-EU stance of his new Defence Minister, and the material benefits which might come to France’s over-stretched and technologically ageing armed forces from using EU structures, tools and funding opportunities, might create new incentives for Paris to invest in the CSDP framework.

Towards a re-fuelled Franco-German engine for CSDP to (finally) take off?

In this context, Macron’s added value could lie in the further consolidation of a Franco-German axis on European defence matters. Diverging security cultures, political positions and citizens’ sensitivities clearly entail differences between Paris and Berlin, including on the use of armed force, the level of defence spending and the role of military cooperation in Europe’s broader political integration.

Nonetheless, Paris and Berlin have been working together quite actively in the past few months on CSDP, notably by issuing a joint paper on European defence last September which influenced the content of the “EU Implementation Plan on Security and Defence” endorsed by EU Foreign and Defence Ministers last November. Macron greatly emphasised the centrality of the Franco-German dialogue to give “a new impulse to European defence in its operational and capacity pillars”, including as a potential building block to trigger a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) among a group of interested EU countries. The next few months, following the forthcoming French polls in June, a joint cabinet meeting in July and the German federal elections in late September, will thus be key to test the potential, as well as the limits, of Macron’s bet on a renewed Franco-German *entente* on CSDP.

Uncertain factors such as France’s ultimate willingness to invest further political capital in CSDP, Germany’s critical reflection on its future role in European security, the way Paris and Berlin might coalesce with (fairly) like-minded member states (including Italy and Spain) and EU institutions, and the wider impact of US President Trump’s markedly transactional approach to Transatlantic security, will all determine whether Macron’s term at the *Elysée* will make a lasting impact on the EU’s struggling defence cooperation. However, the window of opportunity for progress in this *dossier* has admittedly widened after his election.

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